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With His Back Against the Wall—

Reagan is fighting to defend a strategy he deems vital to U.S. security. He is making gains—but are they enough?

In the wake of his extraordinary appearance before a special joint session of Congress, President Reagan still faces an uphill struggle to save his Central America policy.

His unusual April 27 nationally televised address to lawmakers appears to have produced these initial results:

- Limited success in winning approval for part but probably not all of the administration's request for increased military aid for El Salvador in its war against Marxist guerrillas.
- Little impact on critics pressing for more-stringent curbs on covert action by the Central Intelligence Agency.
- Apparent failure in a bid for bipartisan support for a strategy in Central America that Reagan insists is essential to avert a grave threat to U.S. security.

While the President's speech—widely hailed as one of his most effective

yet—may have slowed the tide running against his Central America policy, the Democratic leadership on Capitol Hill left no doubt that it intends to continue to challenge him on this issue.

Denouncing Reagan's strategy as "a formula for failure," Senator Christopher Dodd (D-Conn.) declared in an official Democratic response that "the administration fundamentally misunderstands the causes of the conflict in Central America." He criticized Washington's preoccupation with Central America's military problems at the expense of what he sees as more-basic social and economic problems.

Even so, the White House was hopeful that a groundswell of pro-administration sentiment would, in the end, materialize across the country and pressure Democrats to change position.

In fact, the President's primary aim in going before a special joint session of Congress—only the ninth such occasion since World War II—was less to influence lawmakers than to mobilize greater public support for his controversial strategy to counter expanding Soviet-

Cuban influence in Central America. "The stakes," says a White House aide, "simply aren't understood."

Drawing a parallel with the Soviet threat in Europe immediately after World War II, Reagan sought to impress Americans with the grave danger that in his view now confronts the nation on its doorstep.

His words: "The national security of all the Americas is at stake in Central America. If we cannot defend ourselves there, we cannot expect to prevail elsewhere. Our credibility would collapse, our alliances would crumble and the safety of our homeland would be put in jeopardy."

Citing Russia, Cuba and Nicaragua as backers of Marxist rebellions in El Salvador and elsewhere in Central America, Reagan dramatized the proximity of the threat by noting: "El Salvador is nearer to Texas than Texas is to Massachusetts."

Soothing fears. At the same time, he went out of his way to try to allay persistent fears that the administration is leading the country into "another Vietnam."

To quote Reagan: "Let me say to those who invoke the memory of Vietnam: There is no thought of sending American combat troops to Central America; they are not needed—indeed, they have not been requested there."

In attempting to appeal to the public over the head of Congress, the President took what many observers view as a high-risk gamble. One opinion poll conducted before the April 27 speech

showed that only 26 percent see the U.S. role in El Salvador as "morally justified"—against 49 percent who dissent.

After Reagan's address, few on Capitol Hill expected a major turnaround in congressional or public opinion. Representative Les AuCoin (D-Oreg.), while acknowledging that "this was a very persuasive speech," said most Americans will not be willing to spend 110 million more in El Salvador while unemployment here stands at 10 percent.

Similar skepticism was voiced by representative Olympia Snowe (R-Me.): "The speech provides a better understanding of Central America for the American people, but I'm not sure it will change a lot of minds. There is a reluctance to get involved because of fear the next step is sending troops."

If these assessments prove to be ac-

curate, the best that Reagan can expect is grudging congressional approval of some additional military aid for El Salvador. Before his speech, a request for 110 million dollars in further arms aid was in deep trouble.

Hill resistance. The House Foreign Affairs Committee had voted against a special 50-million-dollar appropriation for El Salvador. And a House appropriations panel cut by 50 percent the 60 million dollars that the White House asked to switch to the embattled Central American nation from other areas.

Even this reduced amount was approved only after Reagan agreed to appoint a special envoy to promote negotiations to bring peace to Central America. Richard Stone, former Democratic Senator from Florida, was named April 28 for that mission by the President.

The consensus now is that the administration will win final congressional authorization, not for the 110 million dollars the White House is seeking but for a substantially smaller amount of additional military aid this year. However, strings are expected to be attached, particularly with respect to the performance of the government in El Salvador in the human-rights field.

In the end, the expectation is that a majority in Congress will be unwilling to take responsibility for scuttling the administration's policy and risk being blamed for "losing" Central America. But clearly Reagan cannot look for broad bipartisan support for a long-term commitment to the campaign against Marxist guerrillas in El Salvador.

Democratic leaders in Congress as well as some moderate Republicans advocate a shift of emphasis from military action to a search for "unconditional negotiations" with the rebels. The administration maintains that any power-sharing pact with the insurgents would be little more than a camouflaged surrender by the El Salvador government.

The negotiations favored by the White House, and which will be pursued by Stone, will be limited to guaranteeing the guerrillas an opportunity to participate in democratic elections. The rebels already have rejected the idea.

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